

The Random Jottings of Donald Jay from Nelson in Pendle.

Worsthorne, The Old Wapentake Law

In the quiet village of Worsthorne, nestled amidst rolling hills and picturesque landscapes, a peculiar law known as the Old Wapentake Law held sway. This archaic decree, originating from the Feudal Court at Clitheroe Castle, governed the entire Honour of Clitheroe, a vast district in England. Under this law, a creditor burdened by a debt of £1 19s. 11 1/2 d. could seek redress by invoking a wapentake.

The wapentake was a summons issued by the creditor and delivered by a bailiff of the Court. It authorized the seizure of property from the debtor's home as evidence of the debt's acknowledgement. Commonly, items such as furniture or household utensils were taken, serving as tangible proof of the process.

Within the humble abode of a small cottage known as "The Kell," resided an old man and his only son. The son possessed a robust, muscular physique but had the unfortunate affliction of being both deaf and dumb. Together, they engaged in the profitable trades of pig-ringing and mole-catching, their livelihood in this tranquil corner of the world.

However, fate cast its shadow upon them as they found themselves ensnared by debt to their local grocer. In response, two bailiffs from Clitheroe arrived at their door, armed with a wapentake. Casually tossing the legal document onto the table, they proceeded to claim the old kettle resting in the corner, deeming it a satisfactory item for their purpose.

The son, being the sole occupant of the cottage when the bailiffs appeared, struggled to comprehend the unfolding situation. Pondering his next move, a brilliant idea dawned upon him. Swiftly rising from his seat, he stealthily locked the bailiffs inside the house, securing the key within his own pocket.

Drawing his father's pig-ringing apparatus from the wall, he grasped one of the bailiffs firmly by the hair, pinning his head between his powerful knees. The mute Sampson, his strength amplified by his silent determination, held the bailiff in an unyielding vice-like grip. Meanwhile, the other bailiff rushed to assist his comrade, but his efforts were in vain as he received a solid blow to his nose, leaving him dazed and disoriented.

Amidst a chorus of muffled protests and indignant snorts from the captive bailiff, the mute son skillfully bored a hole through the bailiff's nose, affixing a ring to it—a painful memento of this unusual encounter. Meanwhile, the other bailiff, witnessing this unexpected turn of events and fearing a similar fate, made a swift decision. Without hesitation, he crashed through the nearest window, shattering the glass and frame as he made his frantic escape, displaying an intense aversion to sharing his colleague's predicament.

The tale of this extraordinary incident quickly spread throughout Worsthorne and its neighboring villages, becoming a legend whispered by the locals around hearth fires. The young man's resourcefulness, despite his communication challenges, became a symbol of courage and ingenuity.

As time passed, the Old Wapentake Law lost its grip on the region, gradually fading into obscurity. Yet, the memory of the brave deaf and dumb hero of Worsthorne remained, a testament to the indomitable spirit that thrived within the hearts of its people—a spirit capable of overcoming any obstacle, be it a wapentake or the limitations of the human condition.

By Donald Jay